



“Gypsies and Jews in the Nazi Racial Order.” V. 5. Aug. 11, 2025.



In the Nazi racial hierarchy, were Gypies placed above, below, or on par with the Jews? Is the primary and secondary literature consistent in its answer to the question?

Short version first: there isn’t a single, neat “ladder” in Nazi racial thinking, but in practice Jews were placed in a unique, demonized category slated for total eradication everywhere under German control, while Roma and Sinti were also racial targets and ultimately victims of genocide, yet treated with more inconsistency, more exemptions, and a later/less centrally uniform drive toward annihilation. If you force a comparison, most scholars would say Roma/Sinti were not “above” Jews ideologically; Jews occupied a singular position as the “world-enemy,” while Roma/Sinti oscillated between being cast as racially alien “asocials” and a distinct racial group to be eliminated—resulting in policies that sometimes looked slightly less absolute or were implemented later. The literature is not fully consistent because the documentary record and policy sequence are more uneven for Roma/Sinti than for Jews.

Now the detail.

Nazi ideology identified Jews as the principal, existential foe (often labeled the “Weltfeind”), which translated into a regime-wide, coordinated, and ultimately continent-wide Final Solution aimed at every person defined as Jewish, regardless of behavior, nationality, or social standing. The persecution of Roma and Sinti, by contrast, ran on partly parallel tracks—criminal-police (Kripo) notions of “asociality,” eugenic–racial hygiene projects, and later SS racial decrees—whose emphases shifted over time and across jurisdictions. Before the war, Roma/Sinti were registered, surveilled, and subjected to forced sterilization and confinement; in 1938 Himmler’s decree on “combating the Gypsy plague” centralized racial-genealogical cataloging, drawing on Robert Ritter’s Racial Hygiene and Population Biology Research Unit. Administratively, parts of the Nuremberg regime (especially the Blood Protection Law) were extended to cover “Gypsies” by ministerial circulars, treating them as racially alien in intimate relations and marriage.

From 1941–42 the persecution radicalized. Himmler’s Auschwitz decree of 16 December 1942 ordered the deportation of “Zigeuner” to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the so-called “Gypsy family camp” (Blle) was established; its liquidation on the night of 2–3 August 1944—“Zigeunernacht”—murdered the remaining thousands. Elsewhere (occupied Poland, the Baltics, the Balkans, parts of the USSR), Einsatzgruppen, police, Wehrmacht units, and collaborationist formations conducted mass shootings and deportations of Roma/Sinti. Death toll estimates range widely (roughly 220,000 to 500,000), in part because killings were dispersed, often poorly recorded, and sometimes folded into “anti-partisan” or “asocial” actions.

Where does that leave the “hierarchy” question? Ideologically, Jews were the singular, all-encompassing racial enemy; Roma/Sinti were also deemed racially alien and targeted for destruction, but the policies showed more ambiguity. For a time some Nazi anthropologists fantasized that “pure” Roma might be of distant “Aryan” origin, leading to temporary exemptions for a minority of Sinti families, military veterans, or “pure-blood” individuals; these were fragile and frequently revoked. This pattern—exceptions, regional variation, and a later, less bureaucratically uniform escalation—differs from the Jews’ situation, where the regime’s aim was consistently comprehensive annihilation across Europe once the Final Solution was adopted. Hence most historians resist flattening the story into a simple “above/below/on par” scale, while still recognizing the Porajmos (Roma genocide) as genocide in its own right.

Is the scholarship consistent? Broadly: agreement that (1) Jews held a unique, central place in Nazi racial cosmology and policy; (2) Roma/Sinti were racially persecuted and suffered genocide; (3) implementation against Roma/Sinti was more uneven. But there is real debate on degree and intent. Some (e.g., Michael Zimmermann; Sybil Milton; many at the USHMM) emphasize the racial character and genocidal outcome, tracing the 1942–44 policies as a centrally driven turn. Others (e.g., Guenter Lewy) stress administrative chaos and criminological framing alongside racism, cautioning about inferring a single, Europe-wide exterminatory blueprint from the outset. Ian Hancock and Romani scholars, in turn, argue strongly that the intent was fully genocidal, with numbers closer to the upper estimates. Because primary documentation for Roma/Sinti is patchier and more local than for Jews, interpretations vary more, especially on chronology, numbers, and the exact balance of “racial” versus “asocial/criminal” labeling at different moments.